

CONSUMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Today's Indian economy is indeed service economy. Given this paradigm shift there is a vital need for exploring this major facet of service quality i.e. complaint behaviour of consumers. In service marketing, consumer complaints are perceived as highly valued market data that can be used to measure service quality, systematically improve service design and delivery, develop a customer-focussed culture, and increase consumer loyalty. Complain behaviour is an emerging area in west but there have been few studies in the Indian context. This study was conducted with the aim to understand the main dimensions underlying the complaining behaviour using Factor analysis. The study revealed several factors that influence the complaint behaviour of Indians. The main factors were categorized as attitude towards the firm, consumer social responsibility, service characteristics, consumer characteristics, and complaint mechanism. The study showed that these factors mainly influence the complaint behaviour of Indian consumers. The Indian consumers were found to be passive with little trust in the firm's complaint redressals. In line with this similar studies can be carried out to examine the differences between complainers and complainers in emerging service sectors (like tourism, hospitality, etc). Thus, the paper significantly provides insights and directions for empirical studies in complaint behaviour for enhancing service quality creation and delivery.

KEYWORDS

Complaining Behaviour, Factor Analysis, Implications & Directions.

INTRODUCTION

Complaining is defined as "an expression of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intra-psychic goals, interpersonal goals or both". Complaining/complaints are one of the central concerns on which marketers have to pay attention. The 1st law of service productivity and quality might be "Do it right the 1st time", but service failures are inevitable. So service firms ought to develop effective service recovery strategies. A service firm and its staff must also learn from their mistakes and try to ensure that problems are being eliminated. To enable the firm in this endeavour a proper and effective complaint mechanism is required. Customer feedback systems should thus ensure that information originating from complaints, compliments and other feedback tools is systematically collected, analyzed and disseminated to derive service improvements. This is where complaints become a central concern of any service organization and especially in developing economies like India where not much emphasis is laid on complaint registering and redressals. Moreover the consumer is also not inclined and properly oriented for voicing complaints in various service encounters. Firms cannot ignore this aspect and need to devise strategies that encourage complaints from consumers and thereafter properly handling and providing solutions to their complaints for better satisfaction and patronage in the future.

Research on the nature and characteristics of customer complaints in service organizations has revealed that those consumers who bother to complain about the service that they receive tend to be the loyal users. Although, these complainers may represent only a small percentage of dissatisfied customers. Service providers are usually able to identify them and, more importantly, take some action to maintain their loyalty. As argued by (Lovelock, 1996), "The more complaints you can generate, the better." Indeed, in service marketing, consumer complaints are perceived as highly valued market data that can be used to measure service quality, systematically improve service design and delivery, develop a customer-focussed culture, and increase consumer loyalty (Fornell, 1987; Lovelock, 1996). Thus, complaint handling/management has become a imperative for a marketer. Specifically, the highly profitable nature of defensive marketing has made marketers increasingly interested in complaint management. Allowing unhappy customers to express their dissatisfaction is useful not only as an effective source of valuable customer feedback, but also as a means of identifying and preventing the defection of potential switchers (Hirschman, 1970). On the other end, complaining forms an important part in the post-purchase behaviour of the customer when their expectations are not satisfied with the purchase. Lovelock explains that whenever a service failure occurs, consumers expect to be adequately compensated in a fair manner. When consumers feel that they are not treated fairly and did not receive adequate justice, their reactions tend to be immediate, emotional, and enduring. Many organizations encourage their customers to complain if not satisfied. In doing so, firms may resolve dissatisfaction, reduce negative comments to third party, obtain useful market information, and retain customers (Gilly, 1985). Moreover, (Reichheld, 1990) explains that the role of complaints takes on added significance, because firms can be expected to boost profit substantially by increasing retention rates by a small percentage. Hence, a considerable effort should be expected on scrutinizing the complaining behaviour of customers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As defined by (Kowalski, 1996) complaining means "an expression of dissatisfaction whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intra-psychic goals, inter-personal goals, or both". On the other hand, (Singh, 1990) has defined consumer complaining behaviour as "a set of multiple (behavioural and non-behavioural) responses, some or all of which are triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase episode". Further, as per (Blodgett, et.al., 1993) there is no single, comprehensive theory of complaining behaviour. Barlow, 1996 presented the results of study done by the Case Western Reserve University, in which interviewed dissatisfied consumers fell into four clusters and were identified as voicers (37%), passives (14%), irates (21%) and activists (28%). Voicers will tell the company that something is wrong, passives will not say anything and will remain purchasing from their suppliers at least for a while, irates will not say a word to the firms but they will engage in negative word-of-mouth and activists more than redress, they look for revenge.

Most of the early studies were descriptive in nature and emphasized on inter-personal influences. Demographic variables, included age, income, occupation, and social class, had been used for these studies. One finding of consumer complaint study revealed that "complainers tend to earn higher incomes, have more education, have professional jobs, and are younger". Further, in depth studies to examine behavior of such consumers showed that consumers appeared to complain largely when they believed their efforts were likely to meet with success. In the eye of the customer, there are a lot of benefits of complaining. One benefit of consumer complaining behaviour is that it gives dissatisfied consumers the opportunity to express their unhappiness (Kowalski, 1996; Richins, 1985). In the study conducted by Alick, 1992 it was found that the most common reason for complaining in social interactions was to vent negative emotions. However, Lovelock (2004) pointed that there are four main purposes of complaining, namely, obtain restitution or compensation, vent the anger, help to improve the service, and for altruistic reasons.

Complaining can manifest itself in different ways. Among the various taxonomies offered in the literature, exit, voice, and negative word-of-mouth behaviour are well known behavioural responses. Customer complaining behaviour is investigated by several researchers. According to them dissatisfaction is considered as a primary determinant of legitimate consumer complaint. The various actions that consumers take may be sub-divided into –no action, private and public action. A dissatisfied consumer never reacts in any manner and continues to behave normally towards the service is called as no action. Private actions include decisions



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to stop further purchases (boycott the service or brand) and warnings to friends, family and others through negative word-of-mouth. Public actions, on the other hand, include redress seeking efforts directed towards the seller, firm, manufacturer and complaints to third party, consumer affairs institution (Bearden Teel, 1983). Similarly, (Lovell, 2004) explains the same scenario in context of services. This is better represented in the Figure 1, that portrays various types of customer responses to service failures. Further, he highlights that it is important to remember that the customer may pursue any one or a combination of these alternatives.

Regarding the variables that influence consumers complaining behaviour, several studies have shown that there is a relationship between complaining and demographic variables, psychographic variables (e.g. consumer personality and attitude toward firms). Demographic variables have been subject of attention and different conclusions have been obtained by different researchers. For instance, (Keng *et al.*, 1995; Heung, 2003) concluded that female consumers are more inclined to complain, while (Manikas, 1997) findings show totally the opposite. Relative to the role of education, research has shown that there is a direct relationship between level of education and complaining. Thus, it is evident that the dimensions of customer complaining behaviour are similar among previous studies. However, younger in age, better education and higher income consumers prefer to complain publicly (Warland, 1975). Bearden, 1984 explain that consumer complain behaviour is inversely related to age and positively linked to income and education was hypothesized. Further, (Moyer, 1985) found consumers with higher income, better education, professional jobs that are younger were significantly more likely to complain. (Singh, 1990) found in general, consistent result with respect to income, education, occupation and age. Some of the personality variables are also found to correlate with complaint behaviour. It was found that compliant is correlated with personality orientations including assertiveness, self-confidence and self-monitoring. Consumers who preferred to be different (do things the way other people don't or individualism) were more inclined to be complainers. Conversely, (Zeithaml, 2003) explains that those who are unlikely to often see complaining as a wastage of their time and effort. Sometimes they don't know how to complain – they don't understand the process or may not realize there are avenues open to them to voice their complaints. In some cases, non-complainers may engage in "emotion-focused coping" to deal with their negative experiences. This type of coping involves self-blame, denial, and possibly seeking social support (Zeithaml, 2003).

In relation to psychographic factors, such as personality and attitude (Heung, 2003) concluded that these factors are the major reasons of compliant behaviour. In the same line, other researchers have concluded that consumers who complain are more socially responsible and willing to take risks, such as the risk of embarrassment when complaining (Fornell, 1979; Keng *et al.*, 1995). If differences between complainers and non-complainers are considered, non-complainers considered that complaining was done by people with little else to do and it would be futile (Keng *et al.*, 1995). Concerning attitude towards firms, several researchers have concluded that there is a positive relationship between responsiveness and complaining (Keng *et al.*, 1995; Richins, 1985). Sometimes consumers are discouraged from speaking up by negative complaint handling procedures, such as simple apologies and nothing more, rejection (verbal or non-verbal), promises that are not acted upon, no response at all, rude treatment, being passed onto someone else, employees who avoid personal responsibility or consumer interviews that turn into interrogations (Barlow, 1996).

With regard to the relationship between 'service characteristics' and complaining behaviour (Keng *et al.*, 1995) concluded that it is more likely for consumer to complain if the service is not performing as promised and this situation can have a negative impact on their image of the firm. It was also demonstrated that there is a direct relationship between price and complaining behaviour, meaning that consumer will engage in complaining behaviour if the service they are dealing with is more expensive.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

Today's Indian economy is indeed a service economy. Given this paradigm shift there is a vital scope for exploring a major facet enhancing service quality i.e. complaint behaviour of consumers. Complain behaviour is an emerging area in west but there have been few studies in the Indian context. This study was conducted with the aim to understand the main dimensions underlying the complaining behaviour of consumers in the NCR. The respondents were asked to recall any recent service encounter and report their level of dissatisfaction with the experience. Thereafter only the dissatisfied were considered for further analyzing their complaint behavior using the technique of Factor analysis. The results were analysed using the SPSS software.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study 'exploratory research' was conducted on a sample of nearly 250 respondents in the NCR. The usable information corresponded to 100 responses which is appropriate for the 21 variable/statements under study. At the very onset, the sample respondents were divided among those who were satisfied and dissatisfied with the service they have received in the past. Then the questionnaire was administered only to the 'dissatisfied respondents' who were either complainers or non complainers. The data were subjected to 'Factor analysis' to understand the main dimensions related to consumer complain behaviour. The scale items used in this study were adapted from other related research studies (Keng *et al.*, 1995; Phau, 2004) and modified accordingly in the Indian context. To check reliability of each factor, it was further subjected to 'cronbach alpha' tests.

FINDINGS

In this study five factors resulted from Factor analysis. These were attitude towards the firm, consumer social responsibility, service characteristics, consumer characteristics, and complaint mechanism. Regarding reliability, the overall alpha score value was found to 0.096 and the total variance was 91.086% in the five factors so extracted using the Principal Component Analysis method. The Table 1 shows the % variance explained for the factors extracted and the respective loadings for each scale item.

The study revealed that Indian consumers complaining behaviour depends mainly on the three factors as - attitude towards the firm, consumer social responsibility and service characteristics. The last two factors (i.e. consumer characteristics and complaint mechanism) are not that important factor underlying their complaint behaviour. These are discussed as follows:-

1) ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FIRM

As per the attitude towards firm, it was found that Indian consumers were mainly 'passive' and do not involve in complaint behaviour because they were uncertain that they will be fairly compensated (also the inconvenience caused in complaining). Moreover, they believe that firms will reject their complaints and the firms, as such, do not have a proper complaint mechanism (emails, feedback forms, etc) to enable the consumers to engage in complaint behaviour. At times its front line employees also make it difficult for the customers to register their complaints. Here, the firm must also reassure its customers about appropriate service recovery & communicate the same to them.

2) CONSUMER SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The study showed that Indian consumers do not see complaining as a right or/and as an obligation. They are not inclined to engage in complaint behaviour mainly as a matter of 'distrust' that their complaint would be heard or they find it 'embarrassing' to complain. Moreover, majority of consumers attribute 'service failures' to themselves (self-blame) so, they feel that they should not complain. It was also found that those consumers, who often complain, do so because they do not want other consumers to experience the same problem (altruist motive).

3) SERVICE CHARACTERISTICS

It was seen that Indian consumers were more likely to complain when the service/services that is involved in the complaint situation had attributes that were important for the consumer, such as high price, long-term expectancy life, or a service/service they use often. This finding was consistent with the study conducted by Keng *et al.*, 1995 who concluded that that it is more likely for consumer to complain if the service is not performing as promised and this situation can have a negative impact on their image of the firm.

4) CONSUMER CHARACTERISTICS

It was found that Indian consumers believe that since firms usually do not care for complaints so, it would be wastage of time to engage in complaint behaviour. Another reason for non-complaining behaviour is that they do not consider complaining as a part of their duty/moral obligation.

CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that Indian consumers are passive and do not show much inclination to complaint. There are several aspects that negatively influence their complaint behaviour. These are mainly related to 'trust' in firms that their complaints would be adequately registered followed by an effective service recovery. So, firms ought to encourage consumers to engage in any kind of complaints (both verbal and non-verbal) through establishing a well-defined complaint handling procedure known to its customers. Here, the front line staff can play a key role in enabling consumers to complain and providing solutions to the same in an effective manner.

Indian consumers feel somehow embarrassed when complaining, and if these characteristics are added to the fact that complaining behaviour is not regarded as their right/duty/social responsibility, it might further lead to 'low rate' of consumer complaints. Moreover, they are not willing to speak up, when dissatisfied with the service/service, because they consider it a waste of their time and energy. So firms have to especially see that service failures are minimal and in case of failures there are well established mechanisms of registering complaints and moreover a proper compensation for the loss/inconvenience. As in services marketers have to remember that the service is as important as its delivery and that service failures are inevitable, here. The entire service organization and its marketing mix elements are exposed to the consumers in each encounter and subsequently in the series of encounters to build up loyalty and patronage.

IMPLICATIONS

All these conclusions have very important managerial implications. Service firms for gaining a competitive advantage must keep their complainers happy so that they don't switch over to other competitors. Moreover they should try to encourage their consumers to complain when they are dissatisfied for improving the scope of service improvements. In fact Customer feedback systems should ensure that information originating from complaints, compliments and other feedback tools is systematically collected, analyzed and disseminated to derive service improvements. Some important implications from this study are as:- Focus on consumers who are complainers and understand their demographic profile (age, gender, education, social class, etc). The reason for this is because it would be more likely to achieve a greater impact from these consumers, because they would have a positive attitude towards complaining.

Have in place mechanisms for handling complaints; otherwise the consumers will increase their negative perception regarding the attitude that firms have to solve complaints.

Firms should be extra cautious of service/service deficiencies when the consumer is highly involved or the perceived risk is greater. They should have proper service recovery mechanism to amend any such inefficiency.

Since it is difficult to avoid service failures, it is imperative for firms to come up with effective service recovery strategy to minimize service defections on part of consumers.

In service context, the service provider can instill trust and confidence in the consumers through a series of interaction wherein each interaction is a 'moment of truth' for the service firm.

LIMITATIONS

This study has been conducted in the Delhi (NCR) so ant further generalizations of its findings in other areas can be restricted and may be used after suitable adaptations. Moreover; the study has in general taken all the services into account without further specifying the various aspects of service creation and delivery.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study has examined the major factors behind complaining behaviour. In line with this study, similar studies can be carried out to examine the differences between complainers and complainers in context of emerging service sectors (like retail, tourism, hospitality sector, etc). This will provide useful insight to the marketers to understand reasons for complaining/non complaining and thereby evolving effective complaint handling and recovery strategies for increased patronage. Further a relative comparison of the various factors can be discussed which will make marketers understand the factors important for complaining behavior and reduce them considerably .Other studies can also be carried out to establish the relationship between the various demographic aspects (like age, gender, occupation, income, etc) of respondents on consumers complaint behavior Still other studies can be conducted to examine the relationship between the complaint behavior and switching behavior of consumers for a specific service.

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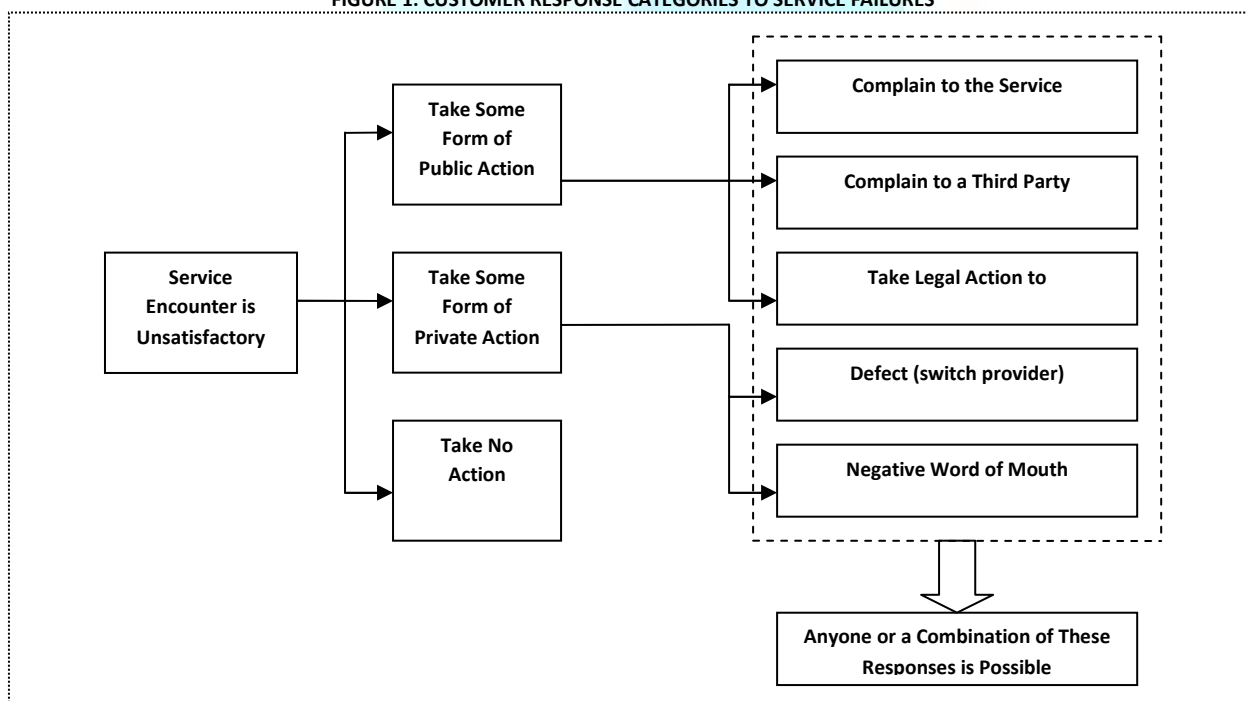
TABLES

TABLE 1: FACTOR ANALYSIS: CONSUMER COMPLAINING BEHAVIOUR CONSTRUCT

Factor	Factor Interpretation (% variance explained)	Loading	Variables included in the Factor
F1	Attitude Towards Firm (27.313%)	.883 .932 .893 .982 .853 .966	Uncertain that I will be fairly compensated Firm rejects any kind to complaints Firm encourages its customers to complain Firm has a well-defined complaint mechanism (emails, feedback forms, etc) Its front line employees make customers feel comfortable in complaining Firm reassures customers about service recovery & communicates it to them
F2	Consumer Social Responsibility (21.497%)	.994 .818 .914 .962 .938 .970 .880	I find it embarrassing to complain I am responsible for the failure so should not complain I fear that the complaints may turn into interrogation Firm will provide repairs/replacements for faulty services I would not like other consumers to experience the same problem Firm will not respond to my complaints Front line employees rude in taking the complaints
F3	Service characteristics (16.910%)	.931 .971 .971 .689	Service is not performing as promised Service is high-priced Service has long-term life expectancy For services that I regularly buy/use
F4	Consumer Characteristics (12.718%)	.943 .910	It is a part of my duty to complain Complaining wastes time and energy
F5	Complaint Mechanism (12.648%)	.829 .901	Don't possess knowledge about the complaint procedure I find it difficult to complain

Source: Result of Factor Analysis

FIGURE 1: CUSTOMER RESPONSE CATEGORIES TO SERVICE FAILURES



Source: Lovelock C.H. (2004), "Services Marketing: People, Technology, Strategy." Prentice-Hall of India, New Delhi.

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